How newspaper editors helped the country become politically articulate

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Abstract

A ‘country-minded’ ideology began to develop in the mid-19th century in New South Wales as newspapers gave the scattered settlements a coherent political voice. This voice, initially used on behalf of individual towns, was later used in cooperative opposition to the perceived evils of Sydney and a government dominated by capital-city interests. Country newspapers played a significant role in the campaign for a new state in northern NSW and, more significantly, in the emergence of a political party to represent country interests. This paper charts the evolution of country-mindedness and the part that country newspapers played in giving their communities an articulate political voice.

Introduction

During the 1850s and the early 1860s the developing network of country newspapers in New South Wales began to give coherence to the scattered settlements and to sow the seeds for a rural ideology that has since been labelled ‘country-mindedness’ (Kirkpatrick 1999: 28). Don Aitkin (1985: 35-36) suggested this term might have been popularised either by Earle Page, the Grafton-based Country Party stalwart and the Daily Examiner’s major shareholder from 1915, or by one of the Country Party’s editor-journalists, such as EC Sommerlad, of Inverell and Glen Innes, or VC Thompson, of Tamworth. It could have been RJ Baker, of Molong, Peak Hill and Gosford, whose policy for the Peak Hill Express read (1902), in part:

The Farming community, the man on the soil, the real backbone of the country, will receive special attention, and the claims and considerations to which this body are so justly and deservedly entitled from the hands of our legislators will be brought prominently forward, and advocated in a whole-hearted, earnest and energetic manner.

Or it could have arisen even earlier. The editor of the Wagga Wagga Express wrote (1866) of the Riverina squatter-separationists: “... they see that their prosperity is crippled, and the development of their resources is retarded by a power which is stronger than their own; they find that they are swamped in the Sydney legislature and that they are practically excluded from the management of their own affairs”. Deniliquin’s Pastoral Times wrote (1871) of a Government “hopelessly centralised in Sydney”.

EC Sommerlad (1950: 99-100; and Aitkin 1965: 2) noted a “very definite country psychology” that was inevitably communicated through the provincial press, which, as the mouthpiece of local opinion, faithfully reflected the separatist and antagonistic feelings of country citizens towards the metropolis. At the 1919 annual conference of the NSWCFA, the proprietor of the Cowra Guardian, JJ Sullivan, said they would never get justice for the country until they had a strong Country Party. Opposing the proposed Bush Week celebrations, to be held in Sydney, Sullivan said (Press Progress 1919: 61):

In the country parents are expected to have their children educated in a small room, with a temperature of 114 [F] in the shade, while in the city the children have good schools, and are educated under favourable conditions. We do not want any patronising airs from the city people... The idea of a glorified gnyah in Centennial Park is nothing less than tommy rot.

At the 1923 NSWCFA conference, discussion by proprietors from Albury to Glen Innes and Broken Hill to Murwillumbah revealed a “remarkable sameness in the disabilities which retard the growth and development” of NSW country towns. “Freights and fares, railways and ports, water supplies and electricity — as it was in the beginning, it is now and presumably ever shall be, in practically every town in the country” (EC Sommerlad 1923). Part of the ‘countryminded’ ideology — which Aitkin summarised as “physiocratic, populist and decentralist” — was that Australia depended on its primary producers for its high standard of living, for only those who produced a physical good added to a country’s wealth. In 1902 a Farmers and Settlers Association leader labelled farming as “productive settlement” (Peak Hill Express 1902). The
‘country-minded’ ideology placed pressure on all Australians, from city and country alike, to support, in their own interest, policies aimed at improving the position of the primary industries. The characteristic Australian was a countryman, the thinking ran, but power resided in the city, where politics was trapped in a sterile debate about classes. The ideology led eventually to the foundation of the Country Party, now the National Party (Aitkin 1985: 35-36).

The NSW Country Press Association played its role in keeping ‘country-mindedness’ to the fore. In 1927, the secretary, TM Shakespeare, told the annual conference that, in his opinion, members should concentrate their attention during 1928 on a vigorous defence of the legitimate country interests; a clearer and more concerted exposition of the nature of country ideals and aspirations; and complete unity amongst members. Nothing, he said, was interfering with the progress of the country more than the centralised system of finance that kept the country “impoverished to the advantage of city dwellers”. The country could now be “quickly rehabilitated to its old position of supremacy of population and industry unless heroic measures are taken to achieve that end” (Press Progress 1927: 50-51). Ernest Christian Sommerlad, who replaced Shakespeare in 1929 as the general manager of the NSWCMA’s business arm, was already a staunch advocate of “the rights of country people, and a fair go for the farmer”. Through his editorial pen at Inverell and Glen Innes he had been preaching for 13 years “the gospel of decentralisation of political power” (DJR Sommerlad 1979: 45; Glen Innes Examiner 1952, 1974). This paper will chart the evolution of country-mindedness by examining how country towns grew, the end of the era of steady growth for towns, the promotion of the northern NSW new statement movement of the 1920s and the emergence of the Country Party — all the while observing the part the provincial press played in the changing scene.

How towns grew and how some stopped growing

A ‘close’ network of towns has developed in NSW within one narrow ribbon along the coast, and then there is a wider zone of about 320km overlapping the Tablelands and Western Slopes, but separated from the coastal ribbon by a buffer of forest along the coastal scarplands. Broken Hill and the irrigation centres are today the main concentrations of population outside these two zones. The North Coast is much more plentifully endowed with towns than the South Coast, which has no railway beyond Nowra and much more limited areas of rural utility. It is exceptional for towns of any size to have grown or survived if they were not situated on a railway line. Apart from some mining centres such as Broken Hill, some mountain resorts such as those of the Blue Mountains, and a few minor ports such as Eden and Ulladulla, most NSW towns are located on rivers. However, since the state’s transport lines cut across the drainage system almost everywhere, the pattern of town distribution is connected more closely with transport patterns than river patterns. Each coastal valley, admittedly, does have its centre, and many of the larger inland towns owe part of their importance to their situations on major stream crossings—situations that afford ease of access for upstream and downstream areas to a railway station. Taree, Kempsey, Grafton and Lismore spring to mind (Ryan 1964: 4).

Towns originated either as ‘Government’ towns or ‘Private’ towns, depending on whether Crown land was surveyed and subdivided by the government itself, or some private landholder subdivided all or part of his holdings for town allotments. Often, the mistakes that the government made in choosing a site, or its failure to offer enough town blocks for sale, left the way open for private landholders either to provide a town subdivision at a better site or, if they should happen to own land adjacent to a Government Town reserve, to capitalise upon the land hunger of many settlers, and extend the effective urban area by subdividing their own land. In some cases, rivalry between government towns and private towns resulted in the decline of one and the assumption of its function by another. For example, the government town of Eden supplanted the privately-owned Boydtown as the shipping centre for Twofold Bay, and, at the opposite extreme, the private town of West Maitland outgrew its government rival, East Maitland (Ryan 1964: 5-6).

By the late 1880s many towns had become municipalities, and many already possessed street-lighting, gas and reticulated water supplies. In the boom years of the 1880s there seemed no reason why the steady growth of the previous thirty years should not continue indefinitely. Suddenly, however, it came to a halt. The most obvious reason was the great depression of the 1890s, with its unemployment and decline in land values. Aitkin has isolated a number of factors whose cumulative effect was to slow down greatly the rate at which country towns grew in size and prosperity. The first was that in 1890 nearly
all the inland country suitable for farming was either under cultivation or under the control of the pastoralist. The second was the railway: by 1890 most of the important settled regions of the colony were directly connected to Sydney by rail.

No capital work was more ardently sought by country people than this one: it was considered the sine qua non of future prosperity as well as the means of overcoming isolation, and much of country political activity between 1860 and 1890 centred around the ubiquitous railway associations and leagues. But what the railway gave with one hand it took away with the other. By linking the town into a colony-wide communication system it brought each town in turn face to face with real competition.

Only the most securely based local industries could survive. One by one local breweries, foundries, mills and factories reduced staff or closed. Between 1881 and 1891 nearly 20 per cent of the natural increment in population on the northern tablelands was lost, most of those who departed settling, presumably, in Sydney (Aitkin 1972: 9-11).

By 1890 the future growth pattern of country towns was set. In the main, there were to be no new towns, except where there were new mining discoveries or large-scale planned rural developments, such as the irrigation areas. The established towns would slowly increase in population, making the most of whatever fortuitous advantages they had: one town, the centre of a diocese, would develop a role as a religious and education centre; a second, a junction for three railway lines, would become a railway town; a third, nicely placed near rich farming areas, would profit greatly from investment in farm machinery in the twentieth century and become a regional entrepôt. But, deprived of many of their local secondary industries by force of competition, none was to become a little Sydney, or even a second Newcastle. And all the while Sydney grew wealthier and larger. More than 130,000 lived there in 1871, nearly half a million in 1901 and 640,000 by 1911. Sydney was 50 times larger than the largest inland town, Bathurst, at the turn of the century; a decade later, it was 70 times larger (Aitkin 1972: 11-12). Country jealousy of Sydney was already being reflected in provincial newspapers before 1890 (Glen Innes Examiner 1887).

Scapegoat sought

When it became clear in the 1890s that the era of rapid expansion of country towns was over, townsfolk everywhere looked for a reason. They could see that local industries had failed to withstand Sydney competition, but they saw the cause as the machinations of commercial and political conspirators in the big city rather than economies of scale. “Sydney tyranny devours every town and village in the colony,” asserted the Bega Free Press (1899). By the turn of the century this simple and plausible explanation had gained wide acceptance and a historical perspective. The Yass Courier (1898) said Sydney had long “forfeited any claim she may have ever had to the kindly regard of the provinces”, her “rings” and “cliques”, commercial and financial, having long wielded an absolute predominance to the detriment of the ‘country’ interests. The Manaro Mercury, Cooma (1898), was blunt: city interests wanted to “treat the producers in the country as mere machines for raising marketable commodities for the enrichment of city traders”. The Mercury raised another crucial issue: Sydney was virtually the only port, despite a thousand miles of coastline and numbers of alternative, if inferior, sites. “If one portion of the seaboard is more accessible, for the purposes of trade, than Sydney, and is necessary to the development of a portion of the colony, facilities for the dispatch of products from that part should be secured to the producers, who should not be heavily taxed by being compelled to trade with Sydney alone, and in many instances send their goods over hundreds of miles of railway line.” The ‘curse of centralisation’ was at the bottom of it. “Centralisation”, in the view of the Bega Free Press (1899), “is the be-all and end-all of Sydney. Every pound of tea, and every necessity of life and business must be drawn from Sydney to the disadvantage of country business.” A century later, centralisation had reached such an extent that, after an election for the NSW Parliament, a political commentator wrote: “There are two States of NSW. The first is the Newcastle-Sydney-Wollongong conurbation that effectively begins at Maitland in the north and ends at Nowra in the south. The second is the rest of the State.” Labor had won a comprehensive victory in the first and performed “quite dismally” in the second (Mackerras 1999).

As the 19th century drew to a close, the growth of a vehement anti-metropolitan feeling tended to blur the traditional inter-town rivalries and take the sting out of political competition within the country. It also overrode to
some extent class hostility within towns: employer and employee could see themselves equally threatened by the menace of Sydney. Central to the spread of the anti-Sydney ideology was the nature of the towns’ newspapers. Some towns had as many as three newspapers, all independently run and generally with vigorous editorial policies. Aitkin suggests it was a natural progression for the country papers to go from supporting the interests of their town — “first championing the cause of selectors against the squatters, then the cause of one town against its rival” — to recognising the common interests of towns against metropolis. The speed with which country newspapers moved into this new phase was aided by the mobility of journalists and editors, by their practice of quoting one another’s editorials and news items as ‘district news’, and by the family networks in the newspaper business. The strong approval that the Country Party received from country newspapers, and the involvement of Country Party politicians in country newspaper ownership predated the foundation of the party (Aitkin 1972: 14-15). For instance, the Tenterfield Star (1907) asked:

Is the Sydney press at last beginning to recognise that the country has a right to country representation in Parliament? ... The city and the city press have exercised a too preponderating influence in country politics ... This journal, in common with a few others, has for long advocated the formation of a country policy ...

The Star regularly editorialised on the evils of Sydney, moral, commercial and financial, the neglect of the country by city politicians, the need for a country party and for a new state. At the end of 1908 the Star noted “a stir among the farmers — they are organising ... The farmers are merely taking a leaf out of Labor’s book, and if they cooperate as efficiently as Labor has done they will become a very powerful force in the land.” The editor saw town interests as distinct from, though not necessarily antagonistic to, those of the farmers, and his goal was a ‘Country Party’ to counterbalance the preponderating and centralising influence of Sydney, not a farmers’ party (Tenterfield Star 1910). From 1913 the Don Dorrigo Gazette, owned and edited by Reginald Henry Vincent, campaigned so strongly for the emerging Country Party that the secretary of the Dorrigo Liberal League wrote to the paper: “Now that the Country Party’s tidal wave has foamed and surged and saturated your whole journal, I may possibly venture a little way into the surf equipped with a life-

buoy, bearing the words Liberalism and Democracy...” A Gazette printer’s devil, John Albert Devine, would recall in later years “the days when Dr Page, Colonel M. Bruxner and Messrs Drummond and Thorby met in the Gazette office to discuss the policy of the new Country Party”. Roy Stanley Vincent — whom his father, Reg, had admitted to the Gazette proprietorship in 1918 - was elected as a Country Party member for the three-member electorate of Oxley in 1922, remained an MLA until 1953 and held a ministerial portfolio from 1932-1941 (Vincent 1980: 74-76; Radi et al 1979: 280).

Separation and new states

Provincial newspapers in NSW initiated political movements but none so effectively as the northern new state movement of the 1920s. As far back as the 1840s the squatters of the northern NSW region had seen political separation as a solution to their conflict with what they regarded as remote and unsympathetic governments and in the following decade there was considerable agitation in the Tweed, Richmond and Clarence districts for inclusion in the new colony of Queensland. In 1857, the Armidale Express said the people of New England were “averse to a division of their territory at the 30th Parallel and the inclusion of the northern part in any colony at Moreton Bay”. It was suggested it would be more appropriate to erect New England into a separate colony with Armidale as its capital (Border Post 1857). In the Riverina, there was agitation for separation as early as 1858, and the agitation grew in 1860. The Riverina Association was inaugurated at a public meeting in Deniliquin on 28 April 1863 when resolutions supporting independence of the territory and its elevation to a new colony were passed (Bushby 1980: 227-229). Twenty-five squatters attended the meeting and contributions totalling £6,000 were pledged (Sydney Mail 1863). FA Corbett, who was appointed full-time secretary of the association at £500 a year, promoted, through letters to the editor – appearing over a nom de plume – in the Argus, Melbourne, the cause of annexation to Victoria rather than the separate colony advocated by his employers. The Pastoral Times exposed this conflict of interest and Corbett retracted ungraciously. The Times editor Jones was banned from meetings of the closely allied Riverine Council (Pastoral Times 1864; Bushby 1980: 230-231). A clique formed and forced the president, Gideon Lang, out of office, and cost the organisation half its members. On 1 March 1864 the original petition for
separation was laid before the Legislative Assembly in Sydney and the House
decided to defer a decision. It was never laid before the House again. Instead,
a second petition was presented to the Governor on 16 May 1865 for
transmission to England (Bushby 1980: 231-232).

When news came through that the Imperial Government had rejected
the Riverina’s pleas for separation, the Wagga Wagga Express (1866) acknowledged
that the grievances of the people of the Riverina amounted to a great deal more
than mere “inconveniences”, as described in the report. But the Express commented:

The Imperial authorities are disinterested onlookers, and are enabled to
take a clearer, juster and more comprehensive estimate of the bearings of the
question than those whose interests are immediately affected (sic). They
have arrived at the conclusion that separation is undesirable, and we do
not feel disposed to quarrel with their decision. They look to the future.
The colonists are too much in the habit of looking to the present.

The Express went on to argue, instead, for federation. It said Australia should
learn from the lesson of the British North American colonies where “the
presence of a powerful neighbour on their frontiers has awakened the people
to the necessity for a Colonial Union, and strenuous efforts are now being made
to bring it about”. Until federation came to Australia, no national progress
would be made, and “we must be content to remain as we are – a mere
aggregation of squabbling Little Peddlings”.

Separation movements flourished at different times for well over a century
in a number of regions. By far the most persistent movement was in the New
England district. This movement passed through four distinct phases: sporadic
and uncoordinated agitation from the 1840s until World War I; sustained
agitation in the 1920s which created a formal new state organisation; renewed
campaigning throughout the 1930s when the new state organisation was
formally linked to the United Country Party; and organised agitation from 1949
until 1967 when a plebiscite to establish a new state in northern NSW was
defeated (Harman 1977: 26). The Northern New State Movement inherited a
separatist tradition that had exercised a strong influence in northern NSW
through much of the 19th century and as recently as 1915 when a short-lived
revival took place. A dispute between Grafton Municipal Council and the NSW
Government over who should maintain a ferry service across the Clarence had

coincided with strong local pressure for the construction of a hydro-electric
scheme on the Nymboida, a tributary of the Clarence. The two issues brought
to the fore a young Grafton alderman and surgeon, Dr Earle Page, under whose
aegis a Northern New South Wales Separation League was formed in the town
in July 1915. The organisation languished when Page went off to the war –
during which, he later said, he “thought and dreamed of nothing else”
– but was revived on his return in 1917 (Milliss 1980: 188-189).

It was in Tamworth that the post-war movement for a separate northern state
was born, mainly through the energy and enthusiasm of Victor Charles
Thompson, editor of the Daily Observer. Thompson had a long record of
championing the needs of country people and criticising the predominance of
Sydney in the state’s development. Through the Observer he had pressed
strongly for the implementation of the proposals of the 1910-11 Decentralisation
Commission (Milliss 1980: 189). In 1915, new state advocate Earle Page had
visited Tamworth and called on Thompson “whose ideas were moving along
similar lines”. Page won Thompson’s support. Stimulus came from other
directions, too, Page wrote.

The need to disseminate ideas, circulate knowledge, and create a favourable
public opinion was uppermost in my mind. When the opportunity arose
during 1915 to purchase the [Grafton] Examiner, a band of keen local
enthusiasts joined me in floating a local company to take it over.

The company converted the tri-weekly Clarence and Richmond Examiner into
da daily – on 1 July 1915 – during the first year of ownership “to keep public
issues constantly before the minds of the people” (Page 1963: 41-42). Even
before daily issue, the Examiner had already begun running an ‘open’ column
of press and other opinions on the separation movement. The column was not
restricted to pro-separation opinions; for instance, one carried an editorial
comment from the Don Dorrigo Gazette, which, while sympathetic to the goals
of the movement, suggested that the formation of a new state offered too many
difficulties to be attempted at present (Clarence & Richmond Examiner 1915). The
Daily Examiner established cooperative arrangements with the Northern Star,
Lismore daily, with each paper supplying the other with local news from their
town. Along with the Tamworth and Murwillumbah dailies, these four papers
developed a uniform policy on decentralisation and became “the vehicles for
our [new state] campaign”, Page said. The northern papers worked to “make
the inarticulate countryside articulate” (Page 1963: 42).
The New England new state movement of the 1920s was essentially a regional anti-urban protest movement led by the local newspapers, the pastoralists and the urban elite in the leading towns. It was inspired by the same beliefs that earlier separationists had held: that city interests dominated political power and were determined to strangle country development, and that more money was being spent on public works in the area. Agitation in the 1920s was more intense, more prolonged and more coordinated largely as a result of the influence of Thompson and the Tamworth daily paper – the Daily Observer, inspired by its great cause, changed its name to the Northern Daily Leader on 1 January 1921 – which circulated throughout much of the region. The Observer/Leader benefited from its devotion to the new state cause: its circulation rose from 2,500 copies in 1913 to 7,000 in 1922 and 13,000 in 1939 (Harman 1977: 27, 29). The 1920s agitation led to the establishment of a formal organisation with a complex structure, the Northern New State Movement, which, in 1921, could boast of 200 local leagues scattered throughout the northern tablelands, the north-west, the north coast, the Liverpool Plains and the Upper Hunter (Harman 1977: 27). One of the problems the movement struck was that, although the Federal Constitution specifically provided machinery for the creation of new states, it failed to make clear whether the Federal parliament or the parliament of the State out of whose territory the new state was to be formed should take the first step. Neither did it specify whether the creation of a new state required the approval of only the electors in the new state area, or all the electors in the State out of whose territory the new state would be formed, or all electors in all States (Harman 1977: 27). Apart from these constitutional difficulties, by 1920 the prevailing political culture, and economic and demographic trends operated against the establishment of new states. Federalism and the existing pattern of State boundaries had proved satisfactory. No strong swell of public opinion had emerged in favour of major changes. With an increased concentration of population in Sydney and a static population in many country districts it was unlikely that any NSW government would approve any scheme for a new state in the north.

Despite these factors, a vigorous new state movement developed in northern NSW in the early 1920s, with Tamworth, Armidale, Glen Innes and Tenterfield as its backbone (Shakespeare 1959b). Long before World War I the Daily Observer, with Thompson as editor, was a strong advocate of decentralisation and increased public expenditure in country areas. In particular, the Observer pressed for full implementation of the recommendations of the 1910-11 Decentralisation Commission (Page 1963: 40-42). Thompson, born in Sydney, entered country journalism at the age of 18 and soon absorbed country values and aspirations. In 1911, at the age of 26, he was appointed editor of the Observer. At the end of the war Thompson secured the approval of his directors to publish a series of articles in favour of a new state. The post-war influenza epidemic delayed publication until January 1920, but by then conditions were ripe to spark off an enthusiastic response. Drought in 1919 aggravated discontent, soldiers back from the war were eager to assert themselves and get a new deal for the north, and the efforts of the development leagues at Grafton and on the tablelands had already focused attention on the lag in development (Harman 1977: 28).

Thompson carefully planned his newspaper propaganda campaign. He began on 5 January 1920 with an outspoken editorial, headed “Why not a new outlook?”, advocating a new outlook to meet the problem of the “exodus from the large towns”. People were lured to the city not so much by higher wages and the abundance of time-filling pleasures, but to escape “the perpetual stagnation in the country districts”.

The towns do not grow; the country districts do not make any progress with their essential developmental problems; public and private enterprise on any scale is lacking; new people come filled with energy and ambition and rapidly sink to the level of the old spiritless inhabitants; young people grow up and drift to the city; the blight of narrowness is over every town and village; men with money rarely spend any for the benefit of their towns; co-operation among people for the common good is almost an unknown quantity (Daily Observer 1920).

In the next 11 issues of the Daily Observer, Thompson printed a series of well-reasoned articles, calling for establishment of a new state in northern NSW. He stressed the “evils of centralisation” and accused successive governments of being partners in a conspiracy with city interests to strangle country development. He echoed the assertion that the railway network had been “constructed on a definite plan aiming at the absorption of all the trade and traffic into the commercial network of Sydney” (Harman 1977: 28). A new northern state, he said, would “certainly be the brightest jewel in the Australian Commonwealth”, incorporating the north coast, the tablelands, the “vast,
productive” north-west and the Tamworth, Upper Hunter, Maitland and Newcastle districts – an area larger than Victoria and with a larger proportionate population than Queensland. For 30 years, he claimed, there had been “no appreciable progress”: a few lucky places had received “a hundred or two people” through the opening up of resumed lands, but the general picture was one of tiny, stagnant towns, with not one centre in the whole area outside Newcastle and Maitland of more than 10,000 inhabitants. Now the region was “sitting with agitation” for railways and other public works, for access to Port Stephens, one of the world’s finest natural ports, which could become the site of a “future great city”, and the development of several other “coastal inlets” as serviceable ports through which adjacent inland districts might progress (Millis 1980: 189). As well as diagnosing the ills of country districts, Thompson prescribed a cure: creation of a new state to achieve the proper economic development of resources. He also provided a practical plan of action: an intensive press propaganda campaign leading to the establishment of local leagues in each town, after which a representative convention would be called to draw up a definite scheme for a new state (Harman 1977: 28).

Most newspapers followed the Observer’s lead, many publishing editorials supporting its plan. The directors of the Observer convened a conference of northern newspaper proprietors who met at Glen Innes on 6 March 1920 under the chairmanship of GA Nankervis, chairman of the Observer’s board of directors. The conference, attended by 13 representatives of 11 newspapers (19 papers sent apologies), agreed to work for a new state and appointed a New State Press League and a Press Propaganda Executive – with Thompson as secretary of both, and EC Sommerlad, of the Glen Innes Examiner, as treasurer – to direct an intensive propaganda campaign. Over the coming year the executive distributed a weekly batch of news and editorial material to all northern newspapers, the cost being met by the 27 newspapers belonging to the Press League. In the first two months 450 articles were circulated and some, or all, were used by at least 61 papers (Harman 1977: 28-29; Millis 1980: 190). Thompson’s articles were combined with other material to produce a 77-page book, Australian Subdivision, edited by Sommerlad (1920) and printed on the Examiner press. Among the papers that did not toe the Thompson line were the Quirindi Gazette, the Wingham Chronicle and the Manilla Express. Alton Richmond Macleod, proprietor of the Manilla Express, “thought for himself and did not relish being a spokesman for a movement or a party” (Shakespeare 1959b). AN Pountney remarked in 1924 that he had believed his Quirindi Gazette had been the only paper in the suggested New State area that had had “the temerity or the audacity to write the New State idea down as a fad” or had suggested that instead of increasing the number of states, and “attendant spending agencies”, there should be a campaign to abolish existing state parliaments and to adopt “a policy of One People, One Destiny, One Government” – but, no, FA Fitzpatrick, of the Wingham Chronicle, “thinks as we do” (Wingham Chronicle 1924). Fitzpatrick said that if the New State scheme were submitted to a referendum “they will find just one kick from the people will leave it in the position of an exploded football or motor tyre”.

After the popular new state movement developed – municipal and shire councils, not newspapers, initiated the formal new state organisation – the strong press support continued. Throughout the 1920s most northern journals gave liberal space to news about the movement and through their leading articles supported the new state objectives. Many printed new state advertisements at reduced rates. The Observer provided office space in Tamworth for the movement’s headquarters and other newspapers provided local leagues with office space and use of office facilities. The four principal northern dailies – Tamworth, Lismore, Maitland and Glen Innes – provided the All Australia New States Executive with office space and clerical assistance in Sydney. Apart from Thompson, other individual newspaper men played a leading part in new state agitation throughout the 1920s – DH Drummond and Sommerlad in Glen Innes, Inverell Tenterfield and Armidale – but Thompson was the movement’s organisation man and executive officer. In late 1920 he became general secretary of the Northern New State Movement and later secretary of the All Australia New States Movement. Even after his election in 1922 to Federal Parliament as the member for New England, he continued as general secretary of the Northern Movement, organising its conventions, directing its propaganda campaigns, and representing it before two Royal Commissions (Harman 1977: 29; Shakespeare 1959b). Harman suggests that the reasons the northern provincial papers took up the new state cause so enthusiastically are clear. They were used to following strong editorial policies, and to championing the cause of country development versus the metropolis. They also knew that their own interests were closely tied to the economic interests of the region. Apart from this, in the 1920s northern newspapers had their own personal grievance against the city. Immediately after the war the
city dailies made a determined effort to increase their circulation in country areas. This was a serious threat to all newspapers but particularly the regional dailies such as Tamworth's Daily Observer (Harman 1977: 29-30).

Emergence of the Country Party

Even as the new state movement was growing legs and demonstrating a powerful voice, events were shaping the formation of a country political force that would depend as heavily on provincial newspapers as the new staters had and would. The Country Party would, with hindsight, be seen as being of more enduring significance than the new state movement as an expression of the demand by country people for greater satisfaction of their social and economic needs. As early as 1893 an informal 'Country Party' grouping existed within the old Protectionist Party in the NSW Parliament, but the first tentative steps towards the creation of a distinct political organisation did not take place until 1913 when the Farmers and Settlers Association (FSA) sponsored a number of candidates. These steps became firmer in 1915 when the FSA annual conference decided to launch a 'Progressive Party' under the leadership of a former Labor Cabinet minister, GS Beetby. It included both country and city members and joined the National government in November 1916. In the 1920 elections the 'reorganised' Progressives – now regarding themselves as an entirely new political party, under the leadership of W.E. Wearn – won 15 seats, but the following year a major split occurred when Wearn led a slender majority of the party's 15 MLAs into coalition with the Nationalists under Sir George Fuller. The seven who refused to join the coalition became known as the 'True Blue' Progressives and comprised the core of the Country Party on its formal inception in NSW in 1925 (Millias 1980: 193-194).

At the federal level, the New England electorate was one of the cradles of nation-wide Country Party organisation. In 1919 the retiring Nationalist MHR, PP Abbott, initiated a conference in Armidale of his party's Federal Electoral Council and representatives of the FSA and the Graziers Association. Abbott proposed the formation in Parliament of a "sort of quasi-third party", which, while remaining officially in the Nationalist fold, would meet to discuss country matters before they were debated in the House. When the idea was unanimously endorsed, the provincial press greeted it enthusiastically. Firmer moves towards shaping a distinct political party came some months later when the Australian Farmers Federal Organisation drew up a policy platform and decided to nominate candidates for the country seats in the federal elections held in December 1919 (Millias 1980: 194). In January 1920 members of the House of Representatives who represented rural electorates formed the Australian Country Party, which came to represent rural regions, not merely the class of businessmen-farmers. Earle Page was the leader (Crowley 1973: 328).

TM Shakespeare suggested that country papers, from then, either supported the Country party or were politically neutral and reticent. By 1929 only half the provincial papers published a leading article (Newspaper News 1929). The Bruxner papers, in the possession of Don Aitkin, contain many passionate provincial newspaper editorials and some fairly slanted news stories about politics in the 1920s and 1930s. On the whole, editorial comment was anti-Labor and pro-Country Party (Aitkin 1965: 2). In the 1950s, Shakespeare regarded Grafton's Daily Examiner as "one of the best edited country papers, but it has for forty years had a pronounced Country Party bias". During the 1930s the Daily Advertiser Wagga Wagga, "strongly supported the Riverina movement led by Charles Hardy, of Wagga Wagga, but it has never been a Country Party organ". Its later policy had favoured the Liberal rather than the Country party but not to the extent of bias, in Shakespeare's view (Shakespeare 1959a). Grant Harman found that perhaps the most significant feature of press political support in the 1856-1930 period that he studied was that after 1910 very few New England newspapers indeed supported the Labor Party, while most gave strong support to the Liberals, Nationalists and the Country Party in turn. Labor's lack of success from 1910 on, and the strength of New England Country Party support from 1919 to 1976 could not be explained without reference to this factor (Harman 1975: 230). RB Walker examined 41 country newspapers for October 1930 and found only two firmly supported Labor in the NSW State elections (Walker 1980: 110). Despite the support that so many papers accorded the Country party, a report circulated in 1928 that the party was going to establish a chain of country newspapers. The chairman of the Central Council of the party, Arthur King Trethowan, MLC, "indignantly denied" that either he or the party was involved in such a scheme. The Country Party leader, Ernest Albert Buttenshaw, expressed a "similar emphatic repudiation" (Daily Advertiser 1928).
Conclusion

Country newspapers played a central role in helping country towns articulate their political needs, at first separately but later in concert. The papers helped country people develop an ideology that has been labelled ‘country-mindedness’ and that helped the people unite to pursue different causes at different times. Country newspapers editors were key figures in the emergence of the Northern NSW New State Movement and in the propaganda war it waged for half a century. They also contributed significantly to the emergence of the Country Party, which became an important force in Australian conservative politics.

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